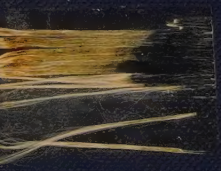
"EVEN UNTO BETHLEHEM"

THE STORY OF CHRISTMAS



HENRY VAN DYKE

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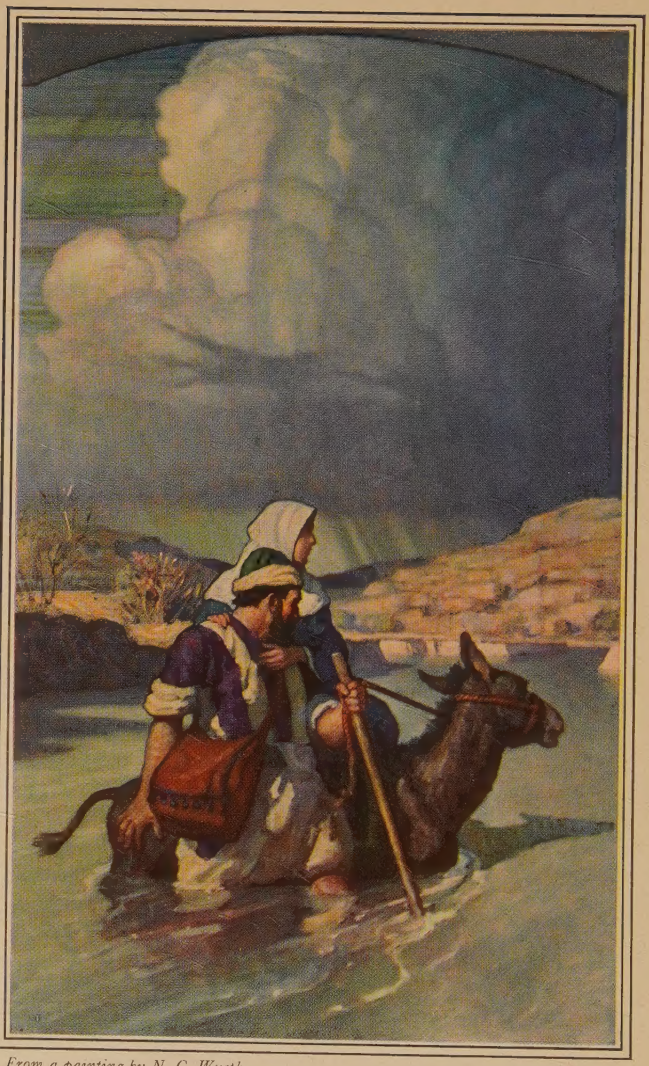
Oh, water cannot
drown that
this book says.



From a painting by N. C. Wyeth.

Mary rode on Thistles . . . and Joseph waded the stream below.

"EVEN UNTO BETHLEHEM"

The Story of Christmas

BY

HENRY VAN DYKE

NEW YORK
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1928

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DEDICATIO

AVE MARIA
GRATIA PLENA
MATER BENEDICTA

A Word to the Reader

Thinking and dreaming over the reality of the first Christmas and how Jesus of Nazareth came to be born in Bethlehem, I was given this story.

It does not claim to be a historical record. It is a picture drawn by imagination looking for the truth. But there is nothing here that is out of harmony with the Gospels, nothing that does not belong to the holy land and time when these things came to pass. I know the long trail between Galilee and Judea by foot and heart. Thus the story seems to me true.

It is also a new story because it answers three natural questions that have never before been answered. It tries to tell the human side of a divine event.

So I offer it to you, reader, in all sincerity; and to Him who is the Son of God and the Son of Man, in all adoration.

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I

On the Hill Above Nazareth

I

On the Hill Above Nazareth

ON the high rondure of the hill above Nazareth the village carpenter, Joseph the son of Jacob, was resting in the evening hour with his young wife Mary. She was very fair and lovely in the habitual dress of a maid of Bethlehem — dark-red bodice, blue skirt and long blue cloak, a white veil covering her light golden hair but not her deep blue eyes and thoughtful face. Her husband was a man of middle age, brown-eyed, brown-bearded,

wearing his working-clothes and carpenter's apron.

The grass beneath them was dry and warm, for it was October; the drouth of summer had left the fields parched; the early rains had not yet fallen. The wide rolling world around them was golden-brown, like the pale color of a topaz. Valley and plain and mountain-side lay bathed in the long radiance of the sinking sun.

It was a favorite time and place with these new-wedded lovers. The solitude and silence brought them closer to each other. The glorious view opened their hearts to the large and tranquil thoughts

in which our little life expands to a nobler meaning, faith seems easier, and love more rich and pure, — a pulse of the very heart of nature.

Northward, snowy Hermon, great Sheikh of Mountains, towered in rosy gold. Eastward, the rolling hills of Moab were a long bulwark beyond Jordan. Southward, across the Plain of Esdraelon, Samaria was a tumbled sea of crests and ridges. Westward, the wide open waters of the Mediterranean flashed in the sunlight or darkened in the shadow of a passing cloud.

The man repeated a verse from

the Psalter in his deep drawling Galilean voice.

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help."

The woman answered, in the clearer accent of the Judean folk.

"My help cometh from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

Her blue eyes grew misty with tears—not tears of grief, but of that mysterious inquietude known only to a woman when she thinks of her time of supreme trial in bringing a new life into the world.

"Help?" she murmured. "God knows I shall need help, if the words the angel spoke to me in my dream are true. I am only a country girl. Why should I be chosen to bear the hope of Israel, the seed of David, the son of the Most High? And the time comes on so fast! Here it is, long past the second harvest; and by the turn of winter my baby must be born. How can I wait for it? How can I face it, husband?"

The bearded man, grown heavy and slow in his life of hard manual toil, laid his big brown hand, calloused and roughened by the

use of saw and plane, mallet and chisel, very gently on the slender hand of his girl wife as if to comfort her. He was slow in speech as well as in thought.

"Be not afraid, my Mary," he said, "it is all right."

Then he tried to turn her mind away from herself. He pointed down to the great Roman highway which wound among the hills far below them—the road from Damascus to Acca where the white-sailed ships lay waiting in the harbor to carry the commerce of the East across the blue Mediterranean.

"Look, wife," he said, "there

goes the third long caravan since we have been sitting here. Busy times!"

The great world distantly went by in a rich parade before the eyes of this rustic couple.

Roman soldiers in glittering ranks, armored and helmeted, with bright eagle-standards shining above their serried spears. Proud horsemen on their Arab stallions. Rich merchants and noblemen in their cushioned litters. Rumbling chariots of brass and gilded wood. Gaily-decorated mules, their collars studded with turquoises and their pack-saddles heaped with crates and

boxes. Pattering asses moving under their huge loads like patient curious insects. Scornful, ungainly camels swaying silently along on their padded feet, fastened one to another by ropes or jingling chains, like lines of barges in a tow, laden with corn from the Hauran, silks and swords from Damascus, spices and fragrant woods from Arabia, sweet fruits from the orchards and gardens of Galilee, ornaments and jewels and carven-work from the Greek cities of the Dekapolis. All the wealth and splendor of earth poured along that paved road with its three tracks, each twelve

feet wide, divided by upright stones.

On the southern track the eastward flow was scanty just now, mostly of unladen beasts and their drivers, going back to fetch another load, and perhaps one or two convoys of gold or silver money, heavily guarded by soldiers. On the central track, riders and foot-travelers met and passed, going and coming. On the northern track, the westward tide was in full flood. The ancient Orient, mother of luxury and proud indulgence, poured her varied riches toward the bright highway of the sea, that swift

ships might bear her merchandise to the eager new markets of Greece and Italy, Gaul and Spain.

Yet on the very edge of all this gleaming, foaming turbulence of world-trade — on the edge of it and above it — the hills and valleys of fair Galilee lay peaceful and secluded. A fertile land and happy; a rustic land and old-fashioned; inhabited by a simple, warm-hearted people who cultivated their gardens and orchards, reaped their crops of wheat and barley, fed their flocks in green pastures, and caught fish in the

still waters of the Lake-that-is-shaped-like-a-Harp.

From father to son the village crafts of the carpenter, the smith, the weaver, the potter, were handed down. From mother to daughter the household arts of spinning and sewing, butter-making and bread-baking were transmitted.

The teachers spoke a plainer doctrine. In the synagogues a simpler truth was preached. There was more poetry and faith in Galilee than in all Jerusalem and the rich cities of Judah.

Of this plain, hard-working, high-thoughted folk were Joseph

and Mary. They were content in poverty, since they were enriched in soul by the promises made of old to the people of Israel. They were happy in obscurity and not cast down, since they knew that they were of the house and lineage of David from whose royal seed the Messiah was to come. They could let the pomp and vanity of the world stream by below them without an envious thought.

So they watched the amethyst colors deepening on the far mountains of Samaria and Moab, and listened to the larks rising and falling on their fountains of song

in the last glow of sunset, and saw the gold and lilac crocuses of autumn blossoming sparsely in the short grass. This provision of beauty was enough for them. With their love, their peace, their great secret hope, they were well-content.

"Come," said Joseph, "the air grows colder. Let us go down to our house. You must not take a chill."

"Yes," answered Mary, "it is time to go home. I will light a fire on the hearth. I hope we can live there quietly until my son is born. It is a friendly house, though it is so small; I can wait patiently

there. I am the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to his word."

So they went down the hill, not by the short steep path, but by a longer easier one. They came to their home on the outskirts of the village, a low cottage of gray stone with the workshop beside it, in a little garden of silvery olive-trees.

The small Egyptian windows toward the street were dark; the wooden door was fastened on the inside with bolts of wood. Joseph drew them back with his check key. They crossed the threshold. Mary kindled a fagot on the

hearthstone, and lit a lamp of oil on the table. The whole house was full of light. From the open door of the workshop came a pleasant smell of fresh-hewn planks and wood-shavings. The carpenter and his wife were at home.

II

In the Carpenter's House

II

In the Carpenter's House

OF all the handicrafts in the world there is none cleaner, pleasanter, and more fragrant than that of the carpenter. He works in friendly stuff. If he knows it well enough and can feel its qualities, it yields readily to his working and takes the outward shape of his thought — chair or table or bed, window-frame or shelf or beam.

Well-seasoned lumber he wants, that it may not warp. Knots and cross-grains trouble him, like

original sin in man; but he takes note carefully, and avoids or conquers them. He judges his material with his eye before he measures it with square and foot-rule. His mind guides his fingers; his fingers fit his tools; his tools work his will in wood.

What good odors rise around him as he labors! From each tree its own fragrance: the resinous smell of the terebinth and the cypress; the delicate scent of the wild-olive with its smooth, curly texture; the faint, dry sweetness of the orange-yellow acacia with its darker heart; the clean odor of the oak with its hard, solid grain;

and on rare days, the aromatic perfume of some precious piece of the cedar of Lebanon, king of trees.

Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth, was proud of his trade. He loved it. At the beginning of December, on a cloudy morning, he was in his shop making a wedding-chest for the daughter of a rich neighbor. The long box of durable shittim-wood was well smoothed with the plane and firmly mortised with pins of oak; and now on the lid Joseph was working an ornament. With gouge and chisel and file he wrought his design; not of birds

or beasts or human figures, for that would have been against the Jewish tradition; but a graceful pattern of a vine with curving branches, broad leaves, and rich clusters of grapes. That was permitted by the law. Was it not even a sacred sign and emblem? Joseph hummed an old song as he carved.

"Blessed is every one that feareth
the Lord,
And walketh in his ways.
Thou shalt eat the labor of thy
hands;
Happy shalt thou be.
Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine,
Planted within thy house."

He stood ankle-deep in shavings, absorbed in his task. From the doorway Mary called to him. He looked up

"Husband, I am going to the village fountain to fill our water-jar. It is empty. There are curious rumors going about among the neighbors. All the other women will be at the fountain. They will tell me the news."

"They surely will," answered the man. "They always know all that is going on,—and sometimes more! But go carefully, beloved. Do not strain to lift the heavy jar."

Gathered around the clear flow-

ing spring, beneath its arch of stone beyond the market-place, Mary found a little crowd of women and girls, filling their jars and pitchers, and talking volubly together. From them she gathered all the gossip. At last came the bit of news which she had feared.

They looked at her curiously and with those sidelong glances which women always wear when they have been talking about you before you came. But they were kind to her. There was even a shade of pity in their look as they told the news which had a special meaning for her. They helped her

to lift her jar of water and balance it on her shoulder. Then she walked home with faltering steps under her burden.

Joseph met her at the door. He took the jar from her shoulder and set it within the house.

"What is it?" he asked. "Why are you so sad?"

"It is bad news, Joseph," she answered, "and it must be true, because it was the wife of the teacher who told me. A decree has gone out from the great heathen man at Rome—the one they call Cæsar—that all the world must be enrolled for the payment of a new tax. The governor of Syria has

proclaimed it, and that vile king, Herod the Idumean, has ordered it to be done. All the people must be written down in the lists in their own cities, according to Jewish law, by tribes and families. Oh, Joseph, do you see what that means for us? We must go to Bethlehem, the city of the family of David. I am terribly afraid of that long, hard journey now, with my time so near. What if we should run into some danger? What if an accident should befall me? What if I should lose the child I carry, the hope of Israel? I could not bear it. Ah, woe is me! Woe is me!"

She was shaken with grief as she sank upon the bench. The tears rolled down her cheeks, splashing on her dark-red bodice and long blue cloak. The white veil which covered her hair was thrown back in disorder. She was the picture of dismay and sorrow.

Joseph kneeled beside her, distressed and bewildered so that he could hardly speak.

"Listen, dear heart," he stammered, "it may not be so bad. You speak of Jewish law — but this decree is Roman law Perhaps there is a way out! Our names might be enrolled here in Nazareth — I was born in Galilee —

then we could send them to Bethlehem to be registered. What do you think? My friend Matthew in Capernaum is an officer for the Romans—a tax-gatherer—I will go and ask him about it.—It is not far to Capernaum! I shall be back soon. Don't be afraid, my wife."

So Mary was a little comforted, and dried her tears Joseph took his staff and a loaf of bread, and set out for the Lake-that-is-shaped-like-a-Harp.

In his absence Mary was at first very restless and anxious about the result of his journey. On the second day she went into the syna-

gogue and took her place with the women behind the lattice, in the enclosure assigned to them. The speaker for that day was a stranger, a rabbi from Jerusalem. Standing, according to the custom, he read from the book of Prophet Micah.

"But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, which art little among the thousands of Judah, out of thee shall One come forth that is to be Ruler in Israel; whose goings forth are from of old, from eternity. Therefore will he give them up until the time that she who travaileth hath brought forth; then the residue of his brethren shall return unto the children of Israel."

Strange words, thought Mary; could they have any special meaning for her? "Bethlehem"? "She who travaileth"? The "Ruler in Israel"? Here was matter that touched her closely.

She listened intently while the preacher, taking his seat now on the bema as was the custom, began to explain the scripture that he had read.

"Bethlehem was David's city. Nowhere else than in this little town can the Messiah, who is to be the son of David, come into the world. 'She who travaileth' is not named. But even now some unknown daughter of Israel may

be carrying the Redeemer of God's people hidden under her breast. Wait then, ye faithful, wait patiently, and look with hope to Bethlehem. To Bethlehem first, to Bethlehem only!"

Mary, standing quietly among the women, with her veil drawn down to hide her face, was thrilled to the heart, uplifted, transfigured with a strong joy. Her prayer in time of trouble had been heard. A word direct from heaven had come to her. She herself was the "unknown daughter of Israel."

Her fear vanished. Her path shone clear before her. She lifted

her veil from her face, and walked home full of courage and vigor, determined in her duty.

Late that evening Joseph returned from Capernaum, dusty and weary.

"Good news," he cried, "Matthew can arrange it. You can be enrolled here. I may have to go to Bethlehem, but you will stay here, dearest!"

"No, my husband," she answered quietly. "My mind has been changed. A message has come to me straight from heaven. All my fears are gone. My son shall be born in the place where the prophet has foretold his com-

ing. For me, even more than for you, this journey is necessary. You shall never leave me nor forsake me. No harm will come to me. The power of the Most High has overshadowed me. Let us go even unto Bethlehem. To-morrow I will send a letter to my cousin Elizabeth to meet us there. In Bethlehem it must be."

III

The Long Long Way to Bethlehem

III

The Long Long Way to Bethlehem

THE preparations for the journey were simple, but it took some time to make them. The affairs of Joseph must be put in order; his promised work delivered, his few debts paid, his small dues collected. With part of his savings he bought an ass, very small and old and thin, and therefore cheap.

"He is not much to look at," said Joseph, "poor old Thistles! But he is patient and tough; and he

picks his living along the road. He can carry you over the rough places. The whole way on foot would wear you out."

The aged man who sold the donkey to Joseph had been a peddler, travelling around the country with earthenware for sale. For these journeys in all kinds of weather he had provided himself with a big mantle of goat's-hair, so closely woven that it was waterproof. This also he wished to sell, since his travelling days were done.

"This will be the very thing for my wife," thought Joseph. "It is not pretty; but the cold

winter rains are coming on, and we may have to sleep out at night before we get to Bethlehem. This will be like a little tent for her."

So Joseph bought it with two of the few silver coins that were left in his purse. Mary laughed when she tried it on over her pretty blue cloak.

"It makes me look like an Edomite woman," she said.

"Little matter how it looks," said her husband, "if it only keeps you dry and warm."

Other clothing too would be needed, particularly some long linen bands for swaddling a baby. These Mary prepared with her

own fingers, taking great pains with them and embroidering Hebrew letters on them in red and blue threads.

Joseph fastened a sharp iron spike on the end of his heaviest staff, so that it would serve as a weapon if any wild beast attacked them. Last of all a supply of bread must be baked, some thin strips of meat dried and salted, a bag full of lentils provided, and a small earthen pot to cook them in — also a cup and a water-bottle. So the outfit was completed and the time of their departure was at hand: the third week in December.

There were three ways from Galilee to the highlands of Judea. One went by the west along the sea-coast and the plain of Sharon. But that was frequented by rowdy foreigners and led through rich heathen seaports, full of abominations. The straightest and shortest road crossed the plain of Esdraelon into the mountains of Samaria, and so by Shechem and Bethel to Jerusalem. But it was a steep road and the Samaritans who lived along that line were rude and churlish folk and the Jews had no dealings with them. The third route descended into the Jordan Valley, followed the

east bank of the river, and went up from Jericho into the hills. Perhaps it was a bit round-about, but it was fairly level and for a good part of the way it was the warmest of the three routes. This was their choice.

So they shut their small stone house and left it in charge of a neighbor; said good-bye to peaceful Nazareth nestling in its green hollow among the hills; and went down the open road to their great adventure.

There were no angelic wings to bear them up and carry them over the rough places, lest Mary should bruise her foot against a

stone. No rich traveller rolling by offered them a lift in his chariot; they were too humble and poor for that courtesy. Nor was there any miracle to remove the hardships or shorten the weary miles of the long, long way. It was plain plodding. Step after step they must measure the hundred miles, with only poor little Thistles to carry the scanty luggage and to let Mary ride on his back now and then, when she was too tired to put one foot before the other.

Past the village of Endor below Mount Tabor where Saul's witch once lived, past Shunem

where Elisha's generous hostess built a room for him on the wall of her house and called it the prophet's chamber, the pilgrims trudged along until they came to a quiet nook on the lower slope of Little Hermon. Here they ate their mid-day meal.

All around them lay the ancient scenes of battle, murder and sudden death. Opposite was the dark bulk of Mount Gilboa, where Gideon sifted out his chosen band to attack the host of Midian, and where desperate Saul killed himself with his own sword because he had lost a battle to the Philistines. Not far away the savage

Jael drove her tent-pin through the temples of the sleeping Sisera. In Jezreel on a spur of Mount Gilboa, the painted hag, Queen Jezebel, looked from her palace window to see Captain Jehu, the killer of her son and other kings, driving boldly up the street. "Is it peace," she cried, "thou Zimri, thy master's murderer?" So Jehu called out to two or three of her servants, and they threw the raddled royal harridan down from the high window, and her blood splashed on the wall, and Jehu's horses trod her under foot. "Bury her decently," he said, "for she was a king's daughter."

Little thought our lowly travellers of these by-gone strifes and cruelties. Mary and Joseph belonged to another kingdom. She was chosen to be the mother of the Prince of Peace, and she was going on foot, very quietly, to Bethlehem, in order that the words of the angel and the prophet might be fulfilled. This obedient resolve made her firm and fearless. On this purpose her whole being was centered.

Through the green vale of Jezreel they passed easily, for the going was nearly level. But when they came beyond the spurs of Mount Gilboa on the south, there

was an abrupt drop of three hundred feet, down which the trail went in steep zig-zags, so that Mary dared not ride, but must go carefully afoot. Before them on its high mound in the long Jordan Valley rose the old city of Bethshan, now called Scythopolis, a heathen town and fortress.

"Not there," said Mary, "we can not lodge there! The very ground on which the idolaters build their houses is unclean. The Gentiles carry the taint of the wickedness by which the serpent corrupted Eve. Only the Jewish people have been cleansed from it. I am very tired; but let us go

on till we come to a village of our own folk. A cottage there is better than a palace among the pagans."

So they trudged on to Bethabara, a poor hamlet beside the murmuring fords of the river Jordan. Here they were received into a humble house with that open hospitality which was practised among the Jews, and rested well until the morning.

The river was swollen by the rains. The fords were greatly deepened and the muddy water was foaming over them. But Mary rode on Thistles, with her feet tucked up, and Joseph waded

the stream below, with his strong left arm around her and his sturdy body pressing up against the little shivering beast to keep him from being swept down by the swift current.

On the eastern side the descent of the Jordan Valley was not hard, though the road was miry, for the rain fell in sheets, and Mary was thankful for the big goat's-hair cloak. All day long they journeyed, but night fell before they could reach the village of Succoth, where they had hoped to find lodging. So they camped on a rising ground above the deep trench in which the Jordan raged

through its matted jungle towards the Dead Sea. The night was not very cold, for they were below the level of the Mediterranean; and though a few drops of rain were falling, still the air of the Ghôr was soft and humid.

Mary was a poet by nature. In her heart the spring of song rose constant and flowed clear. Before she slept she sang again that lyric she had made more than six months ago when she visited her cousin Elizabeth beside the crystal fount of Ain Karim.

"My soul doth magnify the Lord;
My spirit hath rejoiced in God my
Savior,

For he hath regarded the low estate
of his handmaid;
Hereafter all the generations shall
call me blessed."

The next day was heavier and more oppressive. The rain held off; but the path dropped steadily below the sea-level, eight hundred, nine hundred feet. These hill-people, accustomed to the pure light air of Galilee, found exertion more difficult.

But Mary's resolution did not fail. Step after step she plodded on. They passed Succoth where Jacob had built him a house and made shelters for his cattle after his wrestling with the angel by

the Brook Jabbok. That same little river was now pouring down in flood and Joseph had to go a long way up and around before he could find a safe ford through its turbid, bluish waters.

Down the broadening Ghôr the pilgrims held their way. There were few villages or human dwellings. On the evening of the third day, Mary's strength being almost spent, they were forced to camp again. This time they were nearer to the thick jungle of the river-bed, where savage beasts lurked—lions and leopards, jackals and wild boars. Joseph encircled the camp with a fire of

thorn-bushes, which crackled and sent up sparks.

"They won't pass this," he said. "Don't be afraid, Mary."

"I'm afraid of nothing," she answered. "I will both lay me down in peace and sleep, for the Lord will watch over his Son whom I carry."

It was sprinkling rain, so she rolled herself in her big mantle and slept. But Joseph kept his fires going.

Once when the yapping of the jackals came nearer he heard also the fierce whine of a leopard, close to the fire, and saw a pair of green gleaming eyes in the darkness be-

yond. He hurled his heavy iron-pointed staff at them. There was a terrible cry of angry pain, a swift pattering of feet in the dark. Then silence. Mary slept on, for she was dead-tired.

The fourth day they reached Beth-Haran, very weary, and found a kindly shelter with poor folks. On the fifth morning they crossed the swollen ford with the aid of the villagers, passed around the stately city of Jericho with its palm-groves and rich gardens soaked in perpetual summer, and took the steep road south-west into the Judean hills.

Here the going was harder for

Mary, heavy with child. Fleeting pains troubled her as she walked, and when she tried to ride it was worse. The Brook Kedron, in summer a bare bed of stones, was now a foaming torrent. They got over it with difficulty. Poor Thistles trembled and slipped among the rocks. Once Mary would have been thrown into the water if Joseph had not caught her in his arms. She suffered more and more. But she was not to be conquered in her purpose.

At noon they rested and took food in a lonely gulch among the red rocks. Wearied by her pains, Mary fell into a brief, troubled

sleep. A vision of sudden death came to her. She saw herself as a woman walking alone over a crimson plain, which rolled and tossed under her feet like a stormy sea. There was a roaring round about her as of many waters. Then the red ground split open and she sank down, down into death; but even as she sank, she lifted her child above her into safety. She woke with a little cry of pain. Joseph ran to comfort her.

"I am not afraid," she said. "I can go through the gates of death to bring forth my son and my Lord."

Towards nightfall they came over the last rugged hill into the little town of Bethlehem.

The inn was full, crowded with people who had come up to be registered; the courtyard swarmed with men and animals in noisy confusion, there was not a single vacant place in the alcoves which opened around it.

But Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, the wife of Zacharias the priest, was there to welcome them. Being forewarned by the letter from Mary that they were coming, she had climbed on foot ten miles across the hills from Bethcar where she lived, carrying her six-

months-old son John, to meet the travellers from Nazareth.

She was gray-haired, over fifty years old, but a strong and hearty woman. She remembered well the day when young Mary had come to visit her in Bethcar more than six months ago, and the child within her had leaped in greeting to the mother of his coming Lord. That unconscious prophecy was now very near to its fulfilment. Elizabeth was a woman of experience, and she knew.

"Come with me," she said, "come quickly, beloved! I have a place for you. It is a dry grotto

in the face of the cliff behind the inn. It has been used as a stable. It has two stalls. In the further part there is nothing but an old ox; the other part is empty and clean, and there is plenty of dry straw for a bed, and there is also a clean manger for a cradle It is all ready, come quickly!"

Elizabeth took command like a general. Mary clung to her, weeping half in pain and half in joy. Joseph followed, leading Thistles. The weary old ass was put into the stall with the ox. Elizabeth spread the straw for Mary's bed, with a deft hand. The baby John was sound asleep in another cor-

ner. Joseph looked in and went away, closing the rough wooden door behind him. Elizabeth the good was left alone with Mary, whose days were fulfilled that she should now bring forth the Saviour in Bethlehem of Judea.

IV

Curtains of Holy Night

IV

Curtains of Holy Night

PART not the curtains of the night, friend of my soul. They are the wings of mystery brooding over the hidden things of life. They are the reserve of the Eternal.

Within that darkness are the sharpest pains and the deepest joys that mortal flesh can feel—interwoven grief and gladness of spirit that words can never tell—fears and hopes so sacred that they should be kept secret save from God, who knoweth all.

If you part the curtains these things are changed; they vanish into thin air. If you try to tell all, you lose part.

All things are lawful to speak of, but all things are not expedient. Reality is precious, but in the deepest depth of reality there is a mystery beyond utterance. Silence and shade lie round about it to guard it from profanation.

We like a man who tells the truth, and nothing but the truth. But the whole truth is more than man can tell.

How a life leaves this world we know not, except that the heart of flesh left behind ceases to beat.

How a life enters this world we know not, except that the heart nourished by the mother's heart begins its own beating.

Let the curtains fall.

Leave the wise Elizabeth and her own sleeping babe, alone with the pure Mary and her son Jesus coming into the world to save sinners.

It is Holy Night.

V

Joy Cometh in the Morning

V

Joy Cometh in the Morning

IN the gray light before sunrise Elizabeth talked with Mary, who was watching her baby asleep in the manger. Joseph was listening, silent and content.

"He is a splendid boy," said Elizabeth.

"Yes," said Mary.

"But not quite so big and strong as my baby John was," said Elizabeth.

"No?" said Mary.

"Yet he will be greater than my John," said Elizabeth. "There is

a look of heaven on his face, as if he came from there."

"Yes," said Mary.

"What are you going to call him?" asked Elizabeth. "He surely must have a noble Jewish name."

"His name is Jesus," spoke up Joseph. "The angel I saw in my dream told me that long ago. For it is he that shall save his people from their sins."

"Yes," said Mary.

At this moment steps and voices were heard outside. There was a soft knocking on the door. Joseph opened it. Four men were standing there. They were simple peasants with sun-burned faces

and rough clothes, but their manners were gentle. The eldest spoke for the others.

"Sir," he said, "we are the shepherds of the sheep which are kept near-by for the Temple sacrifices. Our names are Zadok, Jotham, Shama and Nathan; poor men, sir, but honest and well known in the neighborhood. We were watching our flocks last night by the tower of Migdal Eder, where one of the prophets foretold that the Messiah should first be made known. A wonderful strange thing happened to us there. May we come in and tell it — that is, if perchance there is a new-born

child here, wrapped in swaddling-bands and lying in a manger?"

"He is here," said Joseph. Then after a glance at Elizabeth, who smiled, he added, "Come in, shepherds, but speak softly."

They entered, stepping as lightly as they could, and looked with wonder on the young child in his quaint bed. Kneeling, they told of their vision of the first angel, with his glad tidings that the Messiah was born in the city of David, and then of the flock of many angels singing glory to God, peace on earth, good will among men. The child John looked at the shepherds with

wide eyes. The baby Jesus slept. Joseph and Elizabeth were amazed at the tale of the shepherds. But Mary, still and happy, kept all these sayings, pondering them in her heart. That is a mother's way.

When the shepherds had gone, Elizabeth rose up and nursed her own child. Then she made ready to go out.

"You must have a better lodging than this," she said. "It will be days and days before you can travel. I have two cousins here who have good houses. Their guest-chambers were full last night because of the crowd in Bethlehem. But to-day one of

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them will surely have room for you. I will go and see."

While she was away there came another stranger to the grotto—a young shepherd, a wanderer in ragged clothes, with a worn and weary face of many troubles. He also desired to see the mother and her wondrous babe of whom his fellows had told him. Of this visit and of its ending the record is written in the story of "The Sad Shepherd." Perhaps there were also other visitors.

Elizabeth came back before noon, with joy in her face.

"Lemuel-bar-Zillai is making his guest-room ready. Come,

let us go quickly. He will be glad to entertain us."

The house was a little larger than their own in Nazareth. Master and mistress were happy to receive them with the ancient Jewish kindness; for they were not mere strangers, they were kinsfolk. Three days later the good Elizabeth, remembering that her husband was lonely in Bethcar, tramped over the hills again to her home beside the beautiful flowing fountain of Ain Karim. Joseph and Mary with the young child Jesus stayed on in the house of Lemuel, welcome guests—welcome as angels.

VI

Old Rites With New Meaning

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Old Rites With New Meaning

THERE were certain forms and ceremonies which they had to observe according to the Jewish law. First of all, after eight days, there was the formal naming of the child and his sealing as a son of Israel by the rite handed down from the times of Abraham. Then, after thirty-one days more, Joseph and Mary must go up to the Temple at Jerusalem, for the purification of the mother and her first-born son.

It was not a long journey—only five miles—and it was a happy one. They were poor, but they had money enough for the offering of the humble—a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons. So Mary dropped her eight pence into the third of the trumpet-shaped openings of the treasure chests which stood in the Court of the Women. The pair of doves was offered and the priest declared that the ransom of the first-born was paid.

An old praying man named Simeon, who frequented the Temple, and an ancient prophetess named Anna, a widow who spent

all her time there, saw the infant Jesus with his parents and something told them that the Messiah for whom they had long waited had come at last.

"Now lettest thou thy servant depart, Lord,
According to thy word, in peace—"

quavered Simeon, holding the infant in his arms. Anna gave thanks to God, in her thin cracked voice, and spoke of the child to all her friends.

On their joyful way back to Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary passed the tomb of Rachel with its low white dome standing be-

side the road. A dim foreboding of sorrow came over Mary's mind. She recalled the words of old Simeon in the Temple, about the sword which was to pierce through her own soul.

"I remember," she said, "there is a word in one of the prophets concerning Rachel; something about 'a voice heard in a high place, mourning and lamenting. Rachel weeping for her children because they are not.' Can this be an omen of grief for us and death for our Jesus? He is so little, and the world is so big and blind and cruel. He may perish in its ignorant crush."

"We must take good care of him, that is all," said Joseph. "He has been trusted to us. He cannot perish until his great task is done. God has promised. We are all in God's hand. We do not know how it will be worked out. We must do our part."

VII

Visitors from Afar

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Visitors from Afar

THE very next day there was a strange event which brought great cheer to the anxious parents, and amazement to the neighbors in Bethlehem. Down the narrow street swayed three tall, richly harnessed camels carrying three strangers in costly raiment. They halted in front of the house of Lemuel and dismounted.

They were wise men of the East, Magians from the mountains of Persia. They said that a sign in the sky had led them to

do homage to a heavenly King whose coming was foretold by the books of Zoroaster, as well as by the Jewish prophets. So they let down their corded bales and brought out gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. Kneeling in the house, they presented their tribute to the child Jesus.

Then they returned to the country from which they came; not by way of Jerusalem, for a dream had warned them against going back to the fierce and suspicious King Herod; but by the same road which Joseph and Mary had travelled—past Jericho and up the Jordan Valley towards

Babylon and the Persian highlands.

Whether the infant Jesus knew anything of this visit of the Magi, except perhaps the glitter of their gold and the sweet smell of their incense, who can tell? But doubtless his parents spoke to him about it in later years.

It was Mary's habit to hold things in memory and ponder their meaning. What might not this coming of the disciples of Zoroaster, princes from a far land, mean for her son Jesus? Was he indeed to be a light for revelation to the Gentiles, as well as the glory of his people Israel?

Mary, devout and strict Jewess that she was, could hardly understand this idea. Yet because she was of a generous nature and loved giving, the thought entered her heart and stayed there. So it was mingled with the very food of life which her son drew from her breasts

VIII

Home Again to Nazareth

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Home Again to Nazareth

NEVER in his life had Joseph the carpenter been so well-off for money as he was after the visit of the Wise Men. It was not vast wealth that they brought him, but it was enough to make him easy in mind and hopeful for the future.

First, there were the rare and precious gums of frankincense and myrrh, the surplus of which could be sold for a considerable sum. Second, there was the gold, not a huge quantity, but at least

a tribute worthy to be presented by princes to the Prince. With this small capital in hand Joseph could easily reward Lemuel for the generous entertainment he had provided, and perhaps set himself up in his trade and stay on as a carpenter in Bethlehem.

This idea appealed to him strongly, for Bethlehem was a pleasant place in a fertile region. He had made friends there, and it was near the Temple. Lemuel favored the plan.

"There are two carpenters here already," said he, "but there is room and need for another. The town is growing. We are right

on the road from Jerusalem to Egypt, where the caravans pass. They give a lot of work in repairs on pack-saddles and chariots. I know of a good place for a work-shop. You will do well to stay here."

"I think so too," said Joseph; "there will be plenty for me to do here. And though the pleasure-palace of that vile fox Herod is on the mountain top just before us, and Jerusalem is full of heathen, after all it is the center of Israel, the holy city where the true King must be lifted up and crowned."

While the two men were busy talking, Mary was silent. She was

thinking of the dear, gray little house in Nazareth, the silvery olive-trees in the small garden, the flowing spring under its stone arch, the friendly peace of the hills and vales of Galilee.

Did not the old rabbis say that Galilee was a better place than Judea to bring up a child? Was not that her first and dearest duty, the holy charge given to her hands? Yet of course she would do what her husband wanted; stay with him here in Bethlehem, or go with him anywhere in the wide world.

Joseph slept at noon that day, and another dream came to him—

a strange sudden dream, disquieting, full of alarm. They were great dreamers in those times, and they paid attention to their visions.

This new dream was terrifying.

An angel told of Herod's crazy design to have all the infant boys in Bethlehem killed by his soldiers, hoping thus to destroy the young child whom he feared and hated as his predicted rival for the throne. It was a madman's idea, unspeakably cruel. But what was that to a crafty lunatic who had already killed his wife, his mother-in-law, his uncle, and his own sons, Alexander, Aristobulus, and Antipater? The Jews knew

Herod too well to doubt his readiness for any bloody villainy. Joseph was numb with the terror of his dream.

"Get up," said the angel, "and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and stay there until I tell thee."

So Joseph rose quickly, and told Mary and their kind hosts the strange message that had come to him.

With part of his gold he bought a strong white ass of the famous breed of the Nile, and plenty of gear for the journey. Hasty were the preparations and the farewells.

Dark was the night when the holy family took the great south road for the distant land of the Sphinx and the Pyramids, the land where the children of Israel were once in bondage and where the ancient idols still throned in their crumbling temples.

The young child who was born to overthrow them had no throne but his mother's breast. There he reigned, in peace and joy, while the strong ass bore them through the darkness towards exile and safety.

It was the longest journey that Jesus ever took on earth.

What befell them in Egypt,

and what they saw there, we do not know and can not guess.

What is certain is that the holy family stayed there until the wicked Herod died of a loathsome disease, and his son Archelaus reigned in his stead over Judea. Then Joseph made up his mind that it would be safe to go back to Judea and set up that new carpenter-shop which he had planned with his friend Lemuel.

But it was not to be so. Another dream came to him in which he was warned not to return to Bethlehem, but to go straight on to his old home in Galilee.

So Mary came again to the little gray house that she loved and the carpenter-shop in Nazareth.

There it was that the thought of Jesus had first entered Mary's heart.

So there it was that the boy lived, and was obedient to his parents and grew strong, filled with wisdom. The grace of God was upon him; and in due time he came forth from that little hill-town on his great mission to serve and save the world.

Praise God

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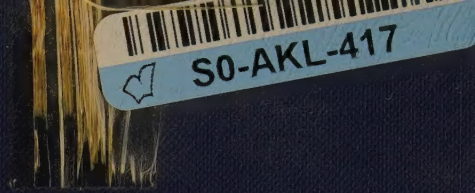
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